Book Review

Pullin, Graham

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Designing Disability: **Symbols, Space, and Society by Elizabeth Guffey**

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 240pp., Paperback ISBN 9781350004276. £19.99.

By Graham Pullin

There is a curious—–and in hindsight excruciating—–incident two thirds of the way through Elizabeth Guffey's book. (Spoiler alert:) 'Swedish bureaucrat' Karl Montan takes it upon himself to add a small circle to the icon conceived by Danish design student Susanne Koefoed and in doing so defines the International Symbol of Access (ISA). The circle is a head—–'a misfit head' in the author's words—–and it turns Koefoed's wheelchair into *a person in a* wheelchair.

This was officially explained at the time as 'an act of simple, bureaucratic pragmatism', which both understates and overestimates Montan's intervention. It comes as a moment of bathos––not in Guffey's narrative as much as in the history of access signage and accessibility itself. Because in that supposedly simple and pragmatic act, a path was taken one way instead of another.

In the previous 130 pages, Guffey has been patiently building up the story of an ideological fight: not just the struggle to create a more inclusive society, but between two equally well-meaning but socially and politically contrasting approaches to accessibility, both in its implementation and in its visibility.

In the blue corner, educational psychologist Timothy Nugent, whose experiment on the campus of the University of Illinois led to it being inclusive to wheelchair users in the post war years; in the red corner, architect Selwyn Goldsmith, whose studies and interventions in the English city of Norwich considered a more diverse population of disabled people, young and old. To add dramatic build-up, Goldsmith was initially one of Nugent's principle supporters in Europe, yet increasingly found Nugent's ideas on access 'deeply unsettling'. This led to them having contrasting views on the role and even need of signage: for Nugent, signage was unnecessarily stigmatizing and obviated by ubiquitous accessibility (Guffey unearths other voices from the time that reveal the oversimplification of this); for Goldsmith, because many disabled people would never be wholly independent, signage played a role not only in guiding them to accessibility measures but also in reminding society of their presence. Guffey is even-handed in pointing out the political differences between an ethos of self-help in the US and the newly emerged welfare states of Europe. The contrasting contexts of a 20th century campus and a city that has grown around an 11th century cathedral must have also had an influence.

Guffey has inspired me to read Goldsmith's own *Designing for the Disabled* (1963), having perhaps previously judged that book by its cover: by an apparent paternalism in its title, an impression hardly contradicted by its design. I had known the story of the ISA having been designed by Koefoed, yet not understood the complexities—–the change made to Koefoed's own design with the addition of the head and the significance of this.

We also hear of Paul Arthur, who designed the wheelchair icon for Montréal's Expo 67, describing 'the extraordinarily ugly head' (inappropriately—–incredibly—–managing to reference not one but two future landmark texts in critical disability studies in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) and Sue Schweik's *The Ugly Laws* (2009)). Reading Guffey's fascinating book I felt at once humbled by my own prior prejudice towards the ISA, yet equally wound up by the missed opportunity. Dieter Rams' eighth principle of good design is that 'Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process show respect towards the consumer.' This feels a valid objection and perhaps the most fitting criticism: that the woeful standard of design is utterly careless and so tellingly disrespectful.

The book is divided in to three sections:

In the first, Guffey traces the history of accessibility up until 1961. The first chapter considers 'The advent of the modern wheelchair (–1945)', an evolution from gouty chairs to the Everest and Jennings tubular steel chair. The relationship of wheelchairs to particular built environments is introduced with the Bath-chair within in the English spa town from which it took its name, and continued in the second chapter, ‘Fitting in (1945–1961)' which centres on Nugent's initiatives in Illinois and other US campuses.

Part Two introduces the European perspective and pits Goldsmith against Nugent, amongst other complexities. Chapter 5 'A design for the real world? (1968–1974)' contains the curious incident of the misfit head. Had the book been framed not as a chronological history, more as a political (and bureaucratic) drama, this might be the moment where we join the story, the backstory—backstories—to be filled in later.

In Part Three, Chapter 6 'Signs of protest (1974–1990)' describes the growth and growing influence of the disability rights movement and the passing of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) in the US. The final full chapter 'A critical design? (1990–Today)' describes new challenges, initiatives and controversies, of which more later.

The book's title is perhaps a little misleading. Guffey herself writes ‘from the outset, the symbol was debated and, one might even say, *designed* by many different powers’, a definition of design that is not pursued deeply enough. Design seems at once overplayed and undervalued: not everything is design, surely, not all activism, legislation, technology; yet neither is design's role restricted to packaging everything else. ‘You cannot not communicate’ as Erik Spiekermann and others have proposed: even if a symbol is not representational of a disabled person, it nonetheless represents disability and our attitudes towards it. Yet debate around the ISA so often reverts to a simplistic and false dichotomy of legibility versus 'aesthetics'.

As a professor of Art History and Design History, with a previous monograph on poster design, it would have been fascinating for Guffey to have brought more of a culture of visual language to this subject matter. There seems so little nuance on display. This is not the author's fault but a reflection that here, as in so many areas of disability-related design, the sensibilities of really good designers are rarely brought to bear. Nevertheless there was an opportunity to call this out with conviction and authority: Guffey identifies as a disabled person and is at the same time an authority on graphic design after all. Gerd Arntz's work on Otto Neurath's Isotype system is mentioned in passing, but not its craft. Accessibility signage was often conceived to integrate with contemporaneous universal signage for international expos. Otl Aicher's 1972 Munich Olympics include a figure in a wheelchair. Yet Isotype icons were required to represent employed and unemployed people, not just horseriders and runners. And Arntz strove to do this not by employing crude metaphor but in the details: the tilt of a head, the stoop of a shoulder, the cut or hang of a jacket. Humanity and empathy come across. Arntz's designs, given their sociological and economic content, were also inherently political. As too is the ISA if disability itself is after all what is being represented. The role of body posture is picked up, if with less nuance, by Brendan Murphy, one of a number of designers who attempted to redesign the icon in the following decades.

The drama unfolds in the golden age of corporate design and logos, of Saul Bass and others. What might have happened had the very best graphic designers been more involved, in a field (still, to this day) mainly left to student competitions and disability experts? There is a tantalising point where an symbol is adopted as part of the building code in Canada, a circle overlapping a zigzag, perhaps representing a wheel and/or three steps (yet at the same time the proportions of the shortened top and bottom treads allude to wheelchair push handles and foot rests, the whole composition alternatively suggesting a wheelchair). Guffey reflects that ‘The Canadian insignia might suggest a sophisticated balance between the US and British approaches toward access and barriers in the public space’. It is described as being 'non-representational' and abstract, and Guffey criticizes it for being 'hardly explicit'. Yet given the contradictory expectations any icon had to meet, might an openness to interpretation be useful after all? In Rams' words again, good design ‘leave[s] room for the user’s self-

expression’. Guffey concludes that designing a symbol to satisfy everyone is ‘almost’ impossible. A possible role for ambiguity seems unexplored.

In the UK, the ISA is often referred to as the Blue Badge—although this contravenes Tom Shakespeare's (2006) distinction between labels and badges: labels, including diagnoses, being applied to disabled people by others; badges, as positive statements of identity, chosen by their wearers themselves. The Blue Badge indicates that the bearer is ‘officially recognised’ as a disabled person and eligible to use accessibility measures such as disabled parking places. So it is more like a blue label.

Two of the most fascinating episodes illuminated in the book involve transitions from label to badge and badge to label: when, in the 1970s, the ISA was appropriated by disability rights activists in their own hand-drawn versions of the official sign incorporated into their banners and stuck onto their own wheelchairs.

And, later, when Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney's guerrilla graffiti intervention, the Accessible Icon Project (AIP: it's not clear why Guffey introduces this as the ‘so-called Accessible Icon Project’), is adopted as an official alternative/replacement to the ISA. It is here that the book most lives up to its title, since the debate and controversies around the AIP really do encompass agency and visual language, ownership and tone of voice. That the heading is 'A twenty-first-century makeover' does not do credit to the critical thought that Hendren and Glenney put into the project and that Guffey reports on.

The author is clearly enamoured by connotations of the words 'misfit' and 'fit'. In one paragraph, alternate sentences riff on misfit, fit and fitted. When Guffey writes ‘the idea that disabled people could be [sic] “fit” [sic] into contemporary society’, it's not clear whether fit is a positive making space for or a more pointed force fit. 'Fit' is used as a past participle; 'misfit' as an adjective (‘a misfit head’ is added to Koefoed's icon)... Fitting, as in appropriate (the adjective, not the verb this time), seems conspicuous by its absence.

Guffey is very good at unpacking complexity and contradiction around access. The way this is done can be exhausting: so many sentences beginning 'However', 'Although', 'But', 'On the other hand', contradicting the preceding sentence, only to be challenged in turn by the next. Perhaps this is deliberate: one gets a visceral sense of the dilemmas. Perhaps it is a by-product of Guffey's timeline structure that she seems to adhere to more strongly than her own thematic structure and which determines when ideas are introduced into the narrative. (But) there came a point when this reader longed for her to take a stance, as the introduction had led me to expect that she would, and give herself permission to knowingly simplify in order that we might all find a way forward, a way in, together.

Is this the final word on the ISA? Of course not, how could it be? The book is for many periods very US-centric. ‘The dynamism of the US disability rights movement (shaped in the wake of the American civil rights movement) sometimes overshadows similar events elsewhere’ comments Guffey. This, after eleven pages of US disability rights history; a page later we are back to another seven pages about the US, continued into the following (final) chapter. So non-US readers are likely to feel less represented, yet value the education; for US readers already engaged in disability studies, the material will already be more familiar. And it is also—like the symbol itself—very wheelchair-centric. Extrapolations into other, and hidden, disabilities seem cursory.

That said, I encourage anyone to read this important book. And to pass it on to colleagues who are not yet involved in disability-related design, from either direction. This is an accessible book in terms of its conversational tone (in contrast to many, sometimes necessarily, denser disability studies texts). Paired with Liz DePoy and Stephen Gilson's *Branding and Designing Disability: Reconceptualising Disability Studies* (2014), it should catalyse reflection and discussion about the implications for disabled people and nondisabled people, designers and design. And provoke new directions in disability-led design.

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Biography

Graham Pullin is Reader in Disability-led Design at DJCAD, University of Dundee and the author of *Design Meets Disability* (MIT Press, 2009). His practice-led research includes Hands of X (www.handsofx.co.uk). He was previously a Studio Head at IDEO.